

## NEW PARTNERSHIPS REQUIRE NEW APPROACHES TO PARTICIPATORY PROGRAM EVALUATIONS: PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

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**Abstract:** Program evaluation is in a period of transition. There is a growing international recognition that government and civil society must work together to accomplish common goals. These new partnerships affect evaluators because of the unequal distribution of power between the partners. Without careful consideration, the evaluator can be seen to represent only those with the most power. This, in turn, affects the perceived independence of evaluators. New partnerships require new approaches. Participatory program evaluation is one useful approach that can lessen undue influence by any one partner and help to create a positive culture of evaluation.

**Résumé:** L'évaluation de programme traverse une période de transition. On reconnaît de plus en plus, à l'échelle internationale, que le gouvernement et la société civile doivent travailler ensemble pour atteindre des objectifs communs. Ces nouveaux partenariats affectent les évaluateurs en raison de la distribution inégale des pouvoirs entre les partenaires. Sans considération adéquate, on peut être porté à croire que l'évaluateur ne représente que ceux qui ont le plus de pouvoir, ce qui, à son tour, affecte l'indépendance perçue des évaluateurs. Les nouveaux partenariats exigent de nouvelles approches. L'évaluation de programme participative est une approche utile qui peut réduire l'exercice d'un pouvoir excessif par un partenaire donné et aider à créer une culture d'évaluation positive.

### BRIEF HISTORY OF PROGRAM EVALUATION IN CANADA

It is useful to begin with a brief history of program evaluation in Canada to understand the changing nature of evaluation. In this country, the history is largely the story of federal government initiatives, provincial accountability plans, and the growth of the Canadian Evaluation Society.

The federal and provincial governments have their evaluation agendas, and often the only topic is accountability. In the late 1960s the Federal Treasury Board funded some planning work, and by the late 1970s the Treasury Board had issued a policy statement requiring departments and agencies to carry out program evaluations. Over the years, the federal government has issued guidelines, given advice and assistance, and provided training. Today most federal departments have an active internal evaluation group. As Mayne and Hudson comment in their overview of Canadian evaluation, resources, policy directives, technical assistance, and the threat of an audit all contribute to the substantial role of evaluation in the federal government (1992, pp. 15–16).

The provinces have, in general, not taken as active a role in establishing evaluation units or carrying out evaluation work on a systematic and sustained basis. In British Columbia, for example, the Auditor General of British Columbia and the Deputy Ministers' Council have published two papers: *Enhancing Accountability for Performance in the British Columbia Public Sector* (Government of British Columbia, 1995) and *Enhancing Accountability for Performance: A Framework and an Implementation Plan* (Government of British Columbia, 1996). The emphasis in both reports is on improved accountability. Program evaluation is seen as one way of finding out whether programs are achieving the outcomes they were intended to achieve, and whether they are doing so with the greatest possible efficiency.

On July 6, 2000, the Government of British Columbia passed the Budget Transparency and Accountability Act, modelled on legislation passed in Alberta in 1995. The guidelines of the legislation focus on results (outputs and outcomes). There is strong encouragement to use performance planning and measurement processes to improve program performance. It is too early to determine the success of this legislation in encouraging performance measurement, let alone program evaluation, particularly as there has since been a change in the government.

The Canadian Evaluation Society, incorporated in 1981, has played an important and dominant role in the history of program evaluation in this country. As a former member of the executive of the British Columbia chapter of the Society, I know the activities include promoting training in evaluation, encouraging provincial chapters to hold meetings, supporting students, sponsoring annual provincial and national conferences, and publishing the *Canadian*

*Journal of Program Evaluation*. In 1995, in Vancouver, I attended the First Joint Canadian Evaluation Society/American Evaluation Society International Conference on Evaluation. There were 1,600 registrants, which is an amazing number of people in one place who are interested in evaluation. There is no doubt that the Canadian Evaluation Society is recognized as the professional organization of evaluators in Canada and is playing an important part in the international evaluation world. We even have a motto: “Don’t Shoot the Messenger” — although we have yet to translate this into Latin.

Increasingly, civil society, including non-profit groups, community activists, church leaders, and the private sector, is demanding a voice in how evaluations are carried out and who is impacted by evaluations. I was at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in Istanbul in 1996. It was the first United Nations conference to formally include the civil society in what was termed a “partners’ conference” (United Nations General Assembly, 2001, p.6). One partner was the government: municipal, regional, and national governments. The other partners included youth, women’s caucuses, the business sector, professionals and researchers, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations. It was the first time that I have seen such sharing of information between members of government and civil society. We were not looking for experts, we were not looking for manuals about how to do things. We were looking to ourselves for our shared truth.

## SOCIOLOGY OF PROFESSIONS

Evaluators who are on contract to large provincial or federal bureaucracies can be constrained in their autonomy. This, in turn, can create serious problems of objectivity, both real and perceived. The evaluator often sees that his or her interests are with the government program manager who does the hiring. This is the person who puts the food on the evaluator’s table.

The sociologist Max Weber was the first to link the process of bureaucratization with the development of specialized professional groups. This link is still strong. Weber would have agreed with Carr-Saunders and Wilson that the professions bring “knowledge to the service of power” (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933, p. 497). Or as Johnson writes in *Professions and Power*, professionalizing is “a process in which the professional as technician or expert was caught up in the bureaucratic machine, as one of its creatures” (Johnson, 1972,

p. 15). Evaluators, as with other professions, can be seen as part of the “invisible and informal support structures that make formal systems work” (Ferner, 2000, pp. 537–538).

Although there may be some inclusion of various “stakeholders” in the initial discussion of the evaluation, the basic design of the evaluation is usually prepared by the evaluator and almost always reflects the interests of the government program manager. In this way, evaluators can act as “gatekeepers” to knowledge, allowing only certain “facts” to emerge from the evaluation. These circumstances were part of the evaluatory environment that has resulted in the recent books and articles on participatory program evaluations.

## PARTICIPATORY PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

Participatory program evaluations are of particular interest when looking at the entangling of the roles of government and civil society. Several influential texts (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1997), articles (VanderPlaat, 1997, 1998), and critiques (Collins, 2000; Gregory, 2000) have been written about this approach to evaluation. Empowerment evaluations, collaborative evaluations, active subject participation, and emancipatory evaluations are some of the terms used. I am using the term “participatory program evaluation” in a generic sense to cover all evaluations where contributions and involvement by partners to the evaluation are expected and valued.

Four key beliefs or arguments are typically advanced to support the notion of participation in evaluations, from the initial planning stages to how the findings are used (Flynn as quoted in Gregory, 2000, pp. 179–180). They are listed below, as well as the not so often advanced idea of emancipatory politics.

*Belief in ethical behaviour.* This is the belief that each person has the right to command his or her own destiny. Participation by the partners is considered “the right thing to do.”

*Belief in expediency.* This belief is often expressed as a concern that those who are not involved in decision-making may revoke or subvert decisions made by others.

*Belief in expert knowledge.* This is the belief that women and men are “experts” in their own lives; therefore, the experts themselves should be involved in the decision-making process.

*Belief in a motivating force.* This is the belief that those who participate in the decision-making will be more aware of the reasons for the decision, and, as a result, will more likely want to see the decisions implemented efficiently and effectively.

*Belief in emancipatory politics.* This is the belief that evaluations can contribute to the democratic process and social change.

## EMANCIPATORY POLITICS AND PARTICIPATORY PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

The idea of emancipatory politics is grounded in the work of Jürgen Habermas' concept of communicative action (Habermas, 1971, 1984). Habermas explores the relationship between actions and the interests that govern actions. Understanding this relationship is useful when thinking critically about evaluation. Whose interests are served by the evaluation? This question is particularly important when the partner who has the most money and power is the partner who is hiring the evaluator.

Habermas distinguishes between two forms of "systemic" oppression or control supported by the political, economic, and normative structures of the government. First, there is the unequal distribution of and access to resources, which is a type of oppression. The second form of systemic oppression results from the over-reliance on scientific discourse and technocratic rationalizations as the basis for decision-making. VanderPlaat writes: "This privileging of 'scientism' not only justifies material and social disparities but also discursively disarms political challenges to the status quo." Rather than discussions in public arenas, social and political issues emerging from everyday life are increasingly being seen as technical concerns subject to technical "fixes." VanderPlaat concludes, "Our capacity to actively engage in social change is, thus, gradually undermined by the growing inability to collectively explore and debate the nature and direction of that change. For Habermas this constitutes one of the most fundamental threats to democracy in the modern world" (VanderPlaat, 1997, pp. 145–146).

VanderPlaat writes that what distinguishes the discourse of empowerment most clearly from other types of participatory evaluations is

its acknowledgement and deep respect for people's capacity to create knowledge about, and solutions to, their

own experiences. Within this discourse, the valid knowledge base from which to initiate social change originates in the collective everyday understandings and experiences of participants rather than in the annals of the social scientific community. (VanderPlaat, 1997, p. 147)

In a more recent article, VanderPlaat concludes that: "The emphasis centres on the individual as a 'knowing' agent capable of collective action and producing change within their environment, rather than on the individual as the object of change-producing strategies" (VanderPlaat, 1998, p. 74). VanderPlaat and others are attempting to move evaluation, as she says, beyond the toolkit of the evaluator into the realm of politics (VanderPlaat, Samson, & Raven, 2001, p.80).

And politics is the realm not only of government but also of civil society. In a brief note in last year's special 20th anniversary issue of the Canadian Evaluation Society *Newsletter*, Burt Perrin, one of the founders of the Canadian Evaluation Society, said that some of the best guides to evaluation he has seen were developed by non-governmental organizations and by other international organizations (Perrin, 2001, p. 5). The civil society is not asleep at the switch. Perrin suggests

We probably have our greatest impact when we can instill a culture of evaluation. In this context, managers and staff think evaluatively, constantly seeking feedback and asking themselves what they can do better. A commitment to evaluation comes when people can see its benefit to them, and when they are part of the process. It rarely comes from imposed, adversarial approaches to evaluation that inevitably result in defensiveness and resistance to future evaluation. (Perrin, 2001, p.5)

The culture of evaluation works best when there is a clear recognition of the five beliefs described above.

## THE ABC OF NEW APPROACHES

### A. Awareness

It is important to increase our awareness and understanding of how different groups in society have different realities. Only with such awareness are participatory evaluations possible. It is also impor-

tant to increase our awareness of the differing ways we receive information and how different members of our society use that information.

### Social construction of reality

Reality can vary depending on where you are in the “here and now.” For example, in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinch, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 139), the authors look at what happens when women begin to question authorities and experts. What happens when they listen to the question, and then ask: “Why ask that question?” Or what happens when women speak out and say: “You’re asking the wrong question.” Women often have policies and programs designed for them (not with them) by provincial and federal governments. Then, as participants in various programs, women are analyzed and studied. They are figuratively prodded and poked and are the subjects of research and evaluations.

A few years ago, I wrote an article called *Beyond the Holodeck: Experiential Learning, Women and Evaluations* (McHardy, 1997). The article is so titled because much as the holodeck is a version of reality, so are the versions of truth that we accept as perceived wisdom or received knowledge.

The holodeck, as some television viewers know, is a deck on the spaceship *Enterprise* in the series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. One of my favourite scenes occurs when Data, an android, goes to the holodeck and programs San Francisco at the turn of the century. The scene then is no longer a spaceship but San Francisco, and Data is no longer an android but a sleuth hot on the trail of a suspect. Like layers of clothes on a child in the middle of the Canadian winter, there seem to be unending layers of realities. There is the reality of the mad genius who invented Data to look like his version of an android. There is the reality of an android and not a gynroid. There is the reality of Data being able to program a new reality of what historians think old San Francisco might have looked like, on a spaceship that doesn’t exist (but was Gene Roddenberry’s version of what a spaceship should look like), and there is the reality of the viewer and his or her interpretation of what is seen on the TV screen.

There have been many books and articles, and endless discussions, about how a group of humans socially construct their world — and then, often with a few assumptions and little knowledge and a lot of

conceit, infer the reality of other groups. This area of study looks at how reality in everyday life is organized around the 'here' of my body and the 'now' of my present. "It is the 'here and now' that focuses our attention on the reality of everyday life" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.36).

Much as I would like to think I have a direct pipeline to the "truth," it is not so. Educators, evaluators, and embalmers all have the capacity of constructing knowledge. These authorities do not receive their knowledge from even higher authorities. Their "right answers" or "truths" are, in fact, social constructions of realities. And these realities may differ. There is usually not "one right answer" but, as with most of life, there are gradations of truth and the shades of gray and bright colours of the ambiguity of complexity.

The first step in the ABC's of new approaches to new partnerships is to continue to develop our awareness of the realities of others. I am asking for a more tolerant and inclusive approach to evaluations.

### Indiemia: The Battle in Seattle and September 11

I still read newspapers, but increasingly I am getting my information from indiemia. This is a new word that means the independent media, the most obvious example being the range of opinions expressed on the Internet. Indiemia was recognized as a force at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999, the "Battle in Seattle." At that time, it became clear that many people were not getting their information from the newspapers, radio, or television — they were turning on their computers and getting almost instantaneous pictures, stories, and information about the situation in Seattle. The need for credible information is the main reason why people are turning to other sources for news. The extent of the vandalism and violence in Seattle, as reported in the mainstream media, for example, was wrong. The police chief in Seattle resigned and the mayor was embarrassed. More recently, people turned to CNN for news coverage of September 11, but after the shock of the pictures on television, many began to search for answers in speeches and articles sent by e-mail and to read alternative press, such as *Adbusters*, to try to understand the terrorist attacks.

Seattle and September 11 are two examples of how the established media is losing its monopoly on access to information. This can affect evaluators. More and more people are learning how to go around

a roadblock to find the information they want. I think international conferences, new questioning about democracy, and the anti-globalization demonstrations are examples of the changing world — how we are governed and how we communicate with each other.

## B. Beliefs, Values, and Attitudes

Without a willingness to question our own beliefs and the assumptions that evaluators bring to their work, little original evaluation work will be done. Challenging our current ways of doing things is crucial. We have excellent tools to analyze qualitative findings, ranging from logic models to new software programs. However, unless we, as evaluators, use them in a thoughtful way, there is a strong possibility that participatory program evaluations will be of limited value.

Our beliefs and attitudes dictate our action. One example is from the field of education. In 1998 the Council of Ministers of Education, a group of highly placed educators across Canada, hired a group of researchers to write a discussion paper on the effectiveness of the training of future teachers. The report is shocking to me, although according to the authors of the report, the low impact of training programs on future teachers is well known and well documented. The authors write:

A significant part of what educators in training know about education is based on their personal experience as students. The future educators have been immersed in their workplace for about 16 years (approximately 15,000 hours) before beginning to teach. Many beliefs about teaching were developed during those years. These beliefs became stronger and more stable with time. Indeed, in North America, it has been proven that most training mechanisms cannot change nor weaken these beliefs. In other words, students go through teachers' school without changing their former beliefs about teaching. (Tardif et al., 1998, p.10)

There are two reasons why training programs have such a low impact on future teachers (Tardif et al., 1998, p. 10). The first is that training programs do not take into account the previous beliefs of the students. The cognitive, social, and emotional filters through which future teachers receive and process new information are so

powerful that little change in beliefs and values take place. It is these very beliefs that the new teachers will teach to the children in the classrooms. And it is in the staff room where other teachers, with similar filters, will reinforce those beliefs. The second reason is that training is given in fragmented doses. Very few courses and other training activities (practice teaching, reflecting thinking) are linked together. The units of learning are independent and closed, last for short periods of time, and have little impact on the future teachers.

We don't often question our own beliefs, values and norms. Perhaps it is time we do.

### C. Consultation

Consultation, meetings, and discussions are all time-consuming. However, the time is well spent. Participatory program evaluation is not just talking with a few "stakeholders" and calling it a day. It is a basic reworking and rethinking of the evaluation process. It is an important way to develop a positive culture of evaluation.

#### Learning from mediators

With new approaches to new partnerships, I think there are some important lessons that we can learn from mediators. As evaluators, we have skills and knowledge about how to do evaluations, but we are just learning about empowering partners to the evaluation. Successful mediation cannot occur between non-equals (Leviton & Greenstone, 1997), and I think that this is also true in participatory program evaluations. Although the focus of responsibility for overseeing the process rests with the mediator or the evaluator, the real exercise of power and control over the outcome rests with each of the partners.

Inequities of power exist because of differences in experience, knowledge, skills, and finances. We, as evaluators, can lessen some of the inequities. We can assist partners to understand issues and data. We can play a significant role by enforcing ground rules in both the process and participation in the evaluation. We can take a neutral position. We can provide full access to any relevant information to all partners. We can also provide a clear, step-by-step procedure, a way to move ahead. A final way to help level the playing field is by

clearly stating that the partners need the contribution and involvement of the others to get a meaningful evaluation.

### Increased intentionality

“Increased intentionality” is a useful phrase coined by Patton (1997, pp. 101–102). It means that participants, at the conclusion of an evaluation, end up with a sense of direction and a commitment to making progress toward their goals.

In participatory evaluations, partners can work together as a group and the evaluators can facilitate group cohesion and collective inquiry. Skills are acquired in setting goals, establishing priorities, focussing questions, identifying problems, collecting data, interpreting data, making decisions based on data, and connecting processes to outcomes. And, quite frankly, the more people that know the importance of collecting good baseline data, the better future evaluations will be.

By contributing their knowledge and expertise, evaluators can be of great assistance. Rather than being “stuck” in the current situation after the completion of the evaluation, there is a way out—a sense of hope, of shared goals, and a belief that those shared goals can be reached. Increased intentionality can contribute to community development and social change.

## CONCLUSION

One of the ways that aspirant professions succeed is by showing that the members of the profession can achieve practical results. For example, government has a stake in evaluation and the professionalizing of evaluators because evaluators can put a stamp of approval on programs that they have evaluated.

Increasingly, however, evaluations are consumer-driven as civil society begins to realize its power and asserts the right to a more balanced evaluation (Clarke, 2000, pp. 60–62). Sections of the public have had their confidence raised by challenging government programs, professional expertise, and service delivery. Each time a poor evaluation is done, there is an uneasy feeling on the part of the civil society that there must be a better way, a way in which they can discuss the issues and suggest better ways of developing and man-

aging programs. This has been encouraged by the spread of knowledge through the media and the indiemedia, and by the expansion of education, especially higher education. The age of deference to experts is over; the evident unwillingness of the professions of medicine and law and religion to adequately deal with complaints from the public is not going unnoticed.

I believe that we, as evaluators, have an opportunity to contribute in a significant way to the democratic process and social change. We can develop a positive culture of evaluation. The ABC's of participatory evaluations are ways to begin to rethink evaluation so that we continue to remain relevant as we develop new partnerships and new approaches in the 21st century.

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